

MILWAUKEE • WISCONSIN

# JOURNAL SENTINEL

To the judges:

Shana Sykes is a 34-year-old single mother of seven children, ranging in age from 4 to 19. She is a walking crisis: Poor, jobless, struggling with mental health issues. She has been to eviction court nine times in 15 years, juggling disability checks in a losing effort to stay in her home.

In the past two years, the family has lived in five different houses and her children have collectively attended nine different schools. The oldest, Rayshon, attended 14 schools before he was able to graduate in May 2018 from an alternative high school.

Milwaukee has thousands upon thousands of such families.

And the churn of those students through city schools drives a hidden crisis that is ravaging prospects for educational improvement. Each year, a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel examination found, 22,000 students shift schools, often mid-year. That amounts to 1 in 4 students in the Milwaukee school system. In some individual schools, the annual turnover tops 40 percent.

All of this was revealed powerfully in Lessons Lost, a groundbreaking look at student churn spearheaded by education reporter Erin Richards. She teamed with photojournalist Angela Peterson, data reporter Kevin Crowe and data visualization specialists Andrew Mollica and Erin Caughey to produce a thoughtful – and disturbing – picture of a hidden problem plaguing the nation’s education system.

Improving urban education has no silver bullet. Low performance is too interrelated with poverty and toxic stress and the generational trauma many children carry into schools. But new data suggests that student turnover is a massive indicator of academic struggle and stagnation. Test scores drop because of it. Graduation rates fall because of it. Teachers don’t know what to do about it. Principals can’t recognize their own students as a result of it.

As one teacher told Richards: “You don’t understand what it’s like to start the year with 30 kids and end the year with 30 kids, but it’s not the same 30 kids.”

Richards pursued the project while on an O’Brien Fellowship for Public Service Journalism at Marquette University. Assisted by student researchers and armed with a massive database of nearly a decade of all individual student transfers in the state, she was able to take an unprecedented look at what is happening in schools across Wisconsin and expose vast discrepancies in how states track this increasingly important measure of academic success.

The ongoing multimedia series is presented in a way to make it accessible to readers, with data visualizations, narrative stories, searchable tables and more. Getting to the final product took sophisticated investigative reporting techniques, skilled data analysis and old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting.

In addition to exposing the scope of the problem, Richards and the team showed that while school choice proponents tout the virtues of easy movement, the vast majority of students are cycling from one low-performing school to another. In the case of virtual schools, the churn is especially acute – as districts sponsor the schools to pull in state aid, but struggling students soon wind up bouncing back into brick-and-mortar schools.

What’s more, even if a student in a high-churn school stays put, their performance can suffer.

One story focused on Carver Academy in Milwaukee, where a host of local nonprofit foundations and national organizations such as Teach for America have joined forces to try and

improve student achievement. Despite their years-long effort and hundreds of thousands of dollars, about 95 percent of Carver students still are not reading or doing math on grade level.

One reason: The massive churn.

We examined one cohort of 47 students who began together in third grade. By eighth grade, only eight of the original students remained. In that period, more than 100 transferred in and out – and that’s just a fraction of the churn at that school.

The Lessons Lost series is full of staggering facts like that. It is an expertly-reported and elegantly-crafted effort, one that highlights entrenched problems as well as innovative solutions, one that digs into the numbers and then tells the stories of the people they represent.

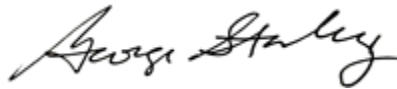
People such as Shana Sykes.

Her mother died when she was 10. She was raped at 14, had a son before 15 and within a year wound up in foster care. As a youth, she bounced through multiple schools. She doesn’t drink or smoke or use illegal drugs. She said she experienced the wreckage of alcohol and abuse as a child. Instead, she tries to build bonds between her children and is fiercely protective of them. She realizes they are on the same path she travelled. In her words:

“I don’t want the kids to stay here and get stuck like me.”

Thank you for considering the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel’s Lessons Lost series, and the team behind it, for the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council’s Scoop of the Year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "George Stanley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "George" and last name "Stanley" clearly legible.

**George Stanley**  
Editor and Senior Vice President  
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel